

LXIII – The Circus Is Back in Town

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By Butler Shaffer

When I was a child and the circus came to town there was a big parade. Clowns, wild animals, and side show "freaks" teased our attentions, while jugglers, animal trainers, and trapeze artists persuaded us to come out to the big tent with promises of stunts like we had never seen. Traveling circuses are largely a thing of the past, but a similar spectacle is still available to us on television, with various carnival acts soliciting our attention. Though they may appear to be competing with one another — much as clowns, high-wire walkers, and trained-dog acts vie for our interest — they are integral parts of a greater enterprise that depends upon our fears, curiosity, and willingness to be bamboozled.

As with other circuses, numerous side show attractions help keep our minds focused on the bizarre and the ludicrous. The two-headed horse and the bearded lady have been replaced by the celebrity transgression feature and the murder-of-the-year trial. The O.J. Simpson circus of a few years ago was such a crowd pleaser because it managed to combine both draws into a center-ring main attraction. More recently, we have had to put up with such lesser distractions as the Jackson family's alleged indiscretions, the question of gay marriages, or the content of Howard Stern's radio programs.

But it is to the center-ring that our attentions are always drawn. Men being shot out of cannons, lion-tamers, trapeze artists, and other dangerous acts attract our interest because of their potentials for death. The other rings may provide us with amusement, but we expect the center-ring to entertain us by exciting our fears. In modern society, the center ring has long been the world of politics, or what H.L. Mencken referred to as the "carnival of buncombe."

It has often been said that entertainment is a form of "escapism," but I believe that it is often used to reinforce social conditioning. Our social and political thinking, indeed our very identities, are wrapped up in firmly-entrenched illusions upon which we insist. We need to believe that "our" group — whatever that may be — is better than "their" group, and that "we" have been victimized by "them." The entertainment industry — of which politics is a part — feeds on such thinking, providing us with movies and television programs that bolster our worldview. They remind us of the lessons in which the schools have already trained us: that the policies, systems, and beliefs upon which our politically structured society is based are precisely what we require in order to live well. Entertainment serves the pragmatic, real-world purpose of confirming our illusions so that we may more energetically fashion the world to make it reflect our mindset.

How else does one account for the raging anger associated with Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion"? I have no case to make either for or against the film's message. I do share one trait with many of the critics and supporters of the film, however: I have not yet seen it! But judging from the irrational responses of many critics — one Israeli politician is reported to have suggested that Gibson should be criminally prosecuted for having produced the film! — it seems that Gibson's "offense" is to have presented a movie that raises questions that may challenge an established mindset.

Good art often has an anarchistic quality to it, challenging the accepted rules, norms, and tastes of a culture. Art moves our eyes beyond the canvas itself, causing us to become aware of our more limited perspectives of life. A good artist is a practitioner of Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle," which informs us that the observer is the observed. Art — like freethinking and speculative philosophy — is forever challenging the status quo, reminding us of the need to remain creative if we are to survive.

But the state has an aversion to inconstancy and changefulness, which is why it has always been at war with individual liberty and its social expression, the free market. The state is preoccupied with the defense of the status quo, because it is the status quo. Anything that challenges the thinking upon which its permanency is grounded — be it in the form of art, scientific discoveries, inventions, new ideas — is a threat to be opposed. This is why political systems are so inextricably tied up with the kinds of entertainment that reinforce the illusions upon which their power depends.

Do you ever wonder why motion picture actors and actresses play such central roles in addressing the "issues" that the political establishment would like you to mistake for important questions? Such people are as well paid as they are because they have honed the skill of pretending to be whom they are not, imaginary characters performing in scripted, make-believe situations. In a word, they are professional illusionists, just the sort of people upon whom political systems depend.

And why are so many of us attracted to such entertainers? Why are cable "news" networks increasingly populated with former comedians, sportscasters, quiz show hosts, and pro wrestlers, to provide social and political commentary? Why have senators and congressmen — and even a president — been culled from Hollywood sound stages? And is it a matter of coincidence that voters in Minnesota and California have selected, as governors, men whose previous entertainment careers had cast them in the roles of muscle-bound strong men?

Politics and entertainment both depend upon a willingness to suspend our judgments about reality, and to be distracted by sleight-of-hand tricks that cloud deceptions. Political systems are grounded in such an abundance of lies and contradictions that the speaking of truth becomes a subversive act. Lest you dismiss this remark as hyperbole, consider the plight of Martha Stewart, whose criminal prosecution was based, in part, upon her publicly denying her guilt!

There is a paradox in Martha Stewart — also an entertainer — being used by the political establishment as a scapegoat, to deflect attention from the falsehoods and deceptions whose revelations might be fatal to the illusions upon which state power depends. The corrupt nature of corporate-state neo-mercantilism that has long permitted some business interests to obtain advantages unavailable in a free market must remain hidden from view: let the state use Martha Stewart as a scapegoat for the "offense" of selling her own stock! George Bush can lie to the world about Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" or connections to Al Qaeda — lies that have led to the deaths of thousands of innocent people — but it is Martha Stewart who will be the sacrificial lamb for allegedly lying to government investigators!

Andre Malraux has stated that "a civilization can be defined at once by the basic questions it asks and by those it does not ask." Thomas Pynchon offered the correlative observation that "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers." These two commentaries tell us all we need to know about the sad state of modern society. What are the questions you bring into the world each day, and who formulated them? Are you the author, or do you allow the media to direct your inquiries, as they do other fashions?

As the presidential circus returns for its quadrennial road show — having already played to the bumpkins in such places as New Hampshire, Iowa, and South Carolina — those who choose to buy tickets will be treated to the same predictable acts as in prior years. The routine of half a dozen clowns exiting a tiny car was replaced by a half-dozen Democratic party hopefuls emerging from little New Hampshire.

And in the center ring, John Kerry, the establishment's official challenger to George Bush, in his high-wire performance, carefully balancing himself so as to avoid doing or saying anything that might be interpreted as a fundamental questioning of state policies. Such a misstep would surely produce a fatal fall, with the circus owners having to call upon a stand-in.

And so, when confronting an administration whose lies and deceptions have reached sociopathic levels; whose military threats against any nation who is "not with us" — threats that might include first-strike use of nuclear weapons — make the United States a menace to humanity itself; whose police-state measures continue to expand; and whose arrogance in the employment of such measures is rendered all the more dangerous by delusions that "God wants George Bush to be president," what challenge can you expect from John Kerry?

The answer is "none." The truth is that Kerry has supported most of what President Bush has done, giving you some idea of the paucity of differences between the candidates. Has Kerry made any campaign promises to end the war in Iraq, or to work to repeal the Patriot Act, both of which he voted for? Has he proposed freeing the "suspected terrorists" who have been held for over two years, without a trial, by the Bush administration; or to

dismantle the Department of Homeland Security; or to conduct a real inquiry into the causes of the 9/11 attacks? Kerry will propose no fundamental changes in Washington, because change is anathema to the status quo interests of the political establishment that runs the circus. In the end, Kerry and Bush will agree upon the same sort of mindless non-issues seen in previous campaigns. Should Willie Horton have been paroled? Should we have a constitutional amendment to prohibit burning the American flag? Are you for or against the "pledge of allegiance?" There will be no discussion of neocon warmongering, or of an American police state or imperialism. I suspect that the "defining issue" will be whether we should have a constitutional amendment prohibiting gay marriages. Those who dream of a third party should realize that America does not even have a two party system!

Whether John Kerry is "Tweedledee" or "Tweedledumber" in this year's circus act will be up to the voters to decide.

But the outcome of the voting is irrelevant to the interests of the establishment that is running the circus. Their system owes its existence to the insight offered by the greatest of all circus masters, P.T. Barnum: "there's a sucker born every minute." Millions of Americans will confirm this observation in November, as they stumble into voting booths across the nation to reaffirm their commitment to the illusions upon which the destruction of their lives and wealth depend. And these same people will proudly advertise their foolishness to their neighbors and coworkers by wearing lapel stickers reading "I voted," a message reminiscent of the high school stunt of putting a sign on a guy's back that said "kick me!"

But there is some hope to be drawn from the fact of the continuing decline in the rate of voting. For whatever reason, more and more people are refusing to participate in this sham exercise. Perhaps, like the man who was fleeced one-too-many times by side show sharpies who promised wonders but delivered the ordinary, or whose "solid-gold" watches left green stains upon the wrist, more of our neighbors have managed to transcend their innocence.

Whatever the explanation, there might be some hope for the country if sizeable numbers of men and women decided to vote, not with ballots or voting machines, but with their feet, by staying away from a system that is designed to do nothing more than reinforce our illusions that "we" run the state. To paraphrase a slogan that arose during the Vietnam War years, "what if they gave an election, and nobody came?"

The Best of Butler Shaffer

